The Legend of Ea-Naṣir: How a Babylonian Businessman Became an Internet Meme

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Abstract

The Complaint Tablet to Ea-Naṣir was discovered during Leonard Woolley's excavations at Ur in the 1920s, and is currently on display in the British Museum. The tablet with its cuneiform inscription, dated to c.1750 B.C., is an excoriating attack on Ea-Naṣir's fraudulent business practices, and has become known as the world's oldest customer complaint. In 2015 the Complaint Tablet was the subject of popular viral social media posts on Reddit and tumblr, followed by a surge of international news coverage. Since then the Complaint Tablet has become a popular and unusually-long-lasting internet meme. Ea-Naṣir, his poor-quality copper ingots, and other elements from the inscribed narrative have been creatively combined with images and references to popular culture, current affairs, and established meme formats. In this paper I explore the emergence, development, and endurance of the Ea-Naṣir meme, based on a corpus of images, texts, and related commentary collected from digital media. My analysis, grounded in a framework for studying the dynamics of memetic processes, argues that the meme serves primarily as an 'in-joke' for online communities, while Ea-Naṣir himself has been transformed into an archetypal 'trickster' figure. While focused on a specific case study, the methods and framework offer a starting point for future research on internet memes in digital folklore, reception studies, and allied fields.

Keywords

copper ingots, digital heritage, folklore, memetics, public archaeology, reception studies,

Introduction

'Are you telling me we know about a specific guy who lived 5000 years ago, by name, because he was a huge asshole'.[1] This crudely but fairly summarises the legend of Ea-Naṣir, ancient Babylonian businessman and modern-day internet meme. My aim in this paper is to examine how a cuneiform tablet found at Ur in the 1920s made a copper trader from c.1750 B.C. famous on social media in the twenty-first century, and what this might tell us about contemporary popular interest in the human past. While focusing on this individual meme, this paper also outlines frameworks for understanding memetic processes, drawn from meme studies scholarship. Archaeology-themed memes like 'Drink the sarcophagus juice' and 'Boar Vessel 600-500 BC Etruscan Ceramic' present challenges and opportunities for curators, heritage managers and public archaeologists, and warrant further study (see Moshenska 2023).[2]

Memes are a slippery subject: abundant, ephemeral markers in a dynamic cultural discourse that might shift course or vanish in an instant. Since I began studying the modern legend of

Ea-Naṣir in 2020 new forms and iterations of his meme have continued to appear. My principal research site for this project was the social networking site tumblr where I collected memes, comments and discussions from 2015 to 2023, using keyword searches within the site and site-focused searches within specific date ranges on Google. I also gathered posts and images from the subreddit r/reallyshittycopper; and from the Facebook group 'Complaint Tablet to Ea-Nasir Memes for Teens Who Are Not of Good Quality'. I coded these images and texts manually by theme, focusing on crossovers with popular culture and other memes, connections with news and current affairs, and on Ea-Naṣir 'meta': social media users' discussions of the meme itself and their thoughts on its enduring popularity.[3]

Another broader context for this paper is the emerging field of reception studies of the ancient Near East (e.g. McGeough 2015; Seymour 2014; and papers in Verderame and Garcia-Ventura 2020). The relatively well-established field of classical receptions has laid out the disciplinary framework for reception studies as the wide-ranging survey of the ancient world's influences on later and contemporary societies. These influences encompass the neoclassical in architecture, literary and theatrical traditions, and representations of ancient Greece and Rome in media such as decorative art, film, comics, and video games (Edwards 1999; Hardwick 2003; Kovacs and Marshall 2011). Studies of Western 'Egyptomania' have followed a similar path albeit slightly later, and there are growing arguments for the value of reception studies across archaeology and studies of the ancient world in general (e.g. Moser 2015). Contemporary Western conceptions of the Near East are grounded in stereotypes, simulacra, and the cultural detritus of centuries of Christian hegemony and European colonialism: meanwhile, internet memes fall comfortably within the broad remits of popular culture and reception studies. This paper is thus intended as a contribution to a critical reception studies that acknowledges multiple overlapping narratives of the ancient Near East and their contemporary relevance and power (Bahrani 1998; Collins 2020; Pinnock 2020).

In the first part of this paper I introduce the Complaint tablet to Ea-Naṣir, the source and origin of the legend, and outline its archaeological context. I then move on to consider the emergence of the meme and its spread through news media and social media, in the context of an analytical framework drawn from meme studies. The main part of the paper focuses on the dynamics of the meme including notable moments of popularity, its crossovers with various other fandoms and other meme forms, and its spread into merchandise such as t-shirts and stickers. Here and elsewhere in the paper, I examine the Orientalist dimensions of the meme, and the figure of Ea-Naṣir as a Middle Eastern man in contemporary Western culture. I will consider the artefact in its display context, and the growing number of fans making 'pilgrimages' to see it in the British Museum. Finally, I reflect on the success and endurance of the meme and its significance for understanding the contemporary reception of ancient history and the human past.

The Complaint Tablet

The Complaint tablet to Ea-Naṣir is a pale beige clay slab roughly the size of an iPhone, inscribed with a cuneiform text in the Akkadian language. It has cracks across its face and several areas are slightly damaged: the tablet appears to have been heated or burned at some point. The tablet was excavated at the site of Ur in 1922 by the joint British Museum/Penn Museum team led by Leonard Woolley.[4] 'Ur of the Chaldees' is named in the

Bible as the birthplace of the patriarch Abraham and became famous in the twentieth century after the ‘Royal Tombs’ were discovered by Woolley’s team (Woolley 1929. See Maloigne 2023 and Verderame 2024 for more recent studies of the contemporary reception of Ur). Today the site lies close to the southern Iraqi city of Nasiriyah.

The house of Ea-Naṣir was one of many in the residential area of Ur designated ‘AH’ by Woolley. The buildings were of mud brick and the area developed organically, apparently without central planning. According to Harriet Crawford’s account, ‘The AH neighbourhood seems to have had all the essential services, with chapels, schools and shops within easy walking distance, and the variety of floor areas in the houses suggests that it was a socially mixed area as well.’ (Crawford 2015, 106). Woolley named the streets in Ur after streets in Oxford, and the house of Ea-Naṣir was thus designated 1 Old Street. While built as a grand and impressive family home with reception room and chapel, later changes to the layout appear to show the subdivision of the house into smaller dwellings. This has been interpreted as a deteriorating financial situation, or possibly a division of the space between heirs after the owner’s death.

The name Ea-Naṣir was found on some of the many tablets stored in a room at 1 Old Street. These detail his career as one of the *alik Tilmun*, or merchants who travel to Dilmun (modern-day Bahrain), then an important nexus in the movements of metals and luxury goods (Crawford 2015). The core of the Dilmun trade was copper ingots, and therein lies the root of Ea-Naṣir’s present-day fame. The text of the complaint tablet is as follows:

> Tell Ea-nāṣir: Nanni sends the following message:
>
> When you came, you said to me as follows: ‘I will give Gimil-Sin (when he comes) fine quality copper ingots.’ You left then but you did not do what you promised me. You put ingots which were not good before my messenger (Ṣīt-Sin) and said: ‘If you want to take them, take them; if you do not want to take them, go away!’
>
> What do you take me for, that you treat somebody like me with such contempt? I have sent as messengers gentlemen like ourselves to collect the bag with my money (deposited with you) but you have treated me with contempt by sending them back to me empty-handed several times, and that through enemy territory. Is there anyone among the merchants who trade with Telmun who has treated me in this way? You alone treat my messenger with contempt! On account of that one (trifling) mina of silver which I owe(?) you, you feel free to speak in such a way, while I have given to the palace on your behalf 1,080 pounds of copper, and Šumi-abum has likewise given 1,080 pounds of copper, apart from what we both have had written on a sealed tablet to be kept in the temple of Šamaš.
>
> How have you treated me for that copper? You have withheld my money bag from me in enemy territory; it is now up to you to restore (my money) to me in full. Take cognizance that (from now on) I will not accept here any copper from you that is not of fine quality. I shall (from now on) select and take the ingots individually in my own yard, and I shall exercise against you my right of rejection because you have treated me with contempt. (For text and translations see Figulla and Martin 1953, 81 and Oppenheim 1967, 82-3)

The large quantity of finds from the excavations at Ur were divided between the British Museum, Penn Museum, and the Baghdad Museum. In due course, the Complaint Tablet was accessioned by the British Museum in 1953, and is currently on display in Room 56, alongside a quantity of copper artefacts. Its label reads: ‘Complaint about delivery of the wrong grade of copper. About 1750 BC (Old Babylonian period), from Ur.’ (Figure 1).

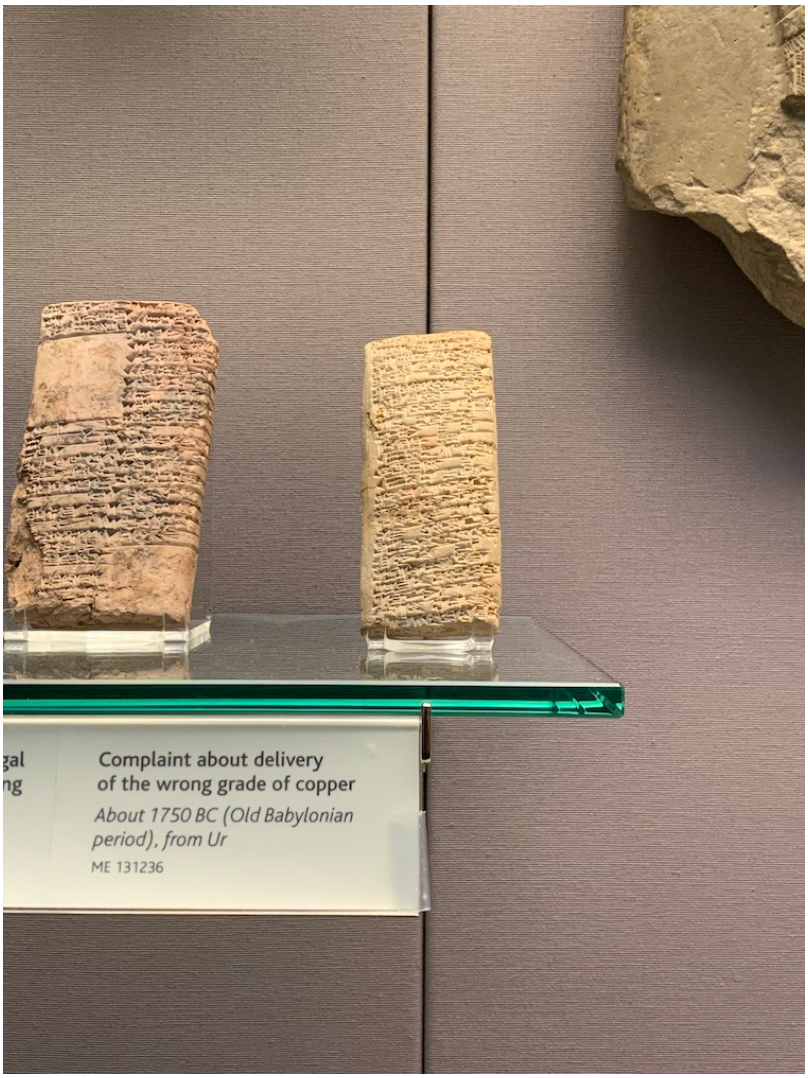

Figure 1: The Complaint Tablet on display in the British Museum in 2024. Photograph by author.

Ea-Naṣir Finds Fame

> Me scrolling through tumblr: *giggles*
> Mom: What’s so funny?
> Me: Copper fraud in ancient Babylon[5]

Most sources trace the current fame of the Complaint Tablet to a post on Reddit on 25 February 2015, which featured a photograph of the British Museum display and added the comment ‘1750 BC problems’. The post gained tens of thousands of upvotes and a range of positive responses, including some that provided more details of the tablet, its history, and

its meaning. Later the same day the image was copied to tumblr with the caption ‘Babylonian era problems’: at the time of writing this post has more than 620,000 notes (reblogs, likes and comments), representing a very high level of interaction.

Within days of these posts, the viral popularity of the Complaint Tablet hit the news. Headlines included ‘Ancient Babylonians were just like us, complained about poor service from retailers’ (McNally 2015); ‘Ancient customer-feedback technology lasts millennia’ (Baraniuk 2015); and ‘Believe it or not, this carving is actually a 3,750-year-old customer service complaint’ (Wheaton 2015). By the end of 2015 the tablet had been published in *More Letters of Note*, an edited volume of letters from celebrities and historical figures such as John Lennon, Dorothy Parker, and Jane Austen (Usher 2015). As Neal Ascherson has observed, media coverage of archaeology often looks for ‘firsts’, ‘oldests’, and stories that show how people in the past were ‘just like us’ (2004, 148, and see for example Kramer 1956).

Amongst the hundreds of online comments on these initial posts there are serious scholarly discussion of the tablet and text. They provide quotes and references detailing Ea-Naṣir’s other business dealings in cloth, kitchenware, and real-estate speculation. A few point out that clay tablets are usually poorly preserved, and that the majority seem to be financial records and inventories. Why, then, did the Complaint Tablet survive?

> Did this guy really collect his hate mail as a hobby, and keep them to admire them later? Did he show them off to friends and family so that they, too, could laugh at the people who wanted reimbursement of this?[6]

Here is the second layer of the Ea-Naṣir myth: not just a scammer but an unrepentant one, an archetypal ‘trickster’, so scornful of his victims and proud of his notoriety that he keeps an archive of his own hate-mail. It is this camp villainy that seems to have amused and entertained so many tumblr users, and this is reflected in the comments on the original post. Here we find Ea-Naṣir compared to numerous other historical, present-day or fictional tricksters and con-men. They include sausage salesman Cut-Me-Own-Throat Dibbler from Terry Pratchett’s *Discworld* novels; wide-boy Arthur Daley from the television series *Minder*; dodgy art dealer Redd the fox from the game *Animal Crossing*; and Joanna the Scammer, a drag act by comedian Branden Miller. Other comments compared Ea-Naṣir to Jeff Bezos and Donald Trump, or connect the name Ea-Naṣir to the perpetually-unpopular video game company *EA* (Electronic Arts). Reflecting on his retention and archiving of an abusive and defamatory letter, one user speculates that Ea-Naṣir may have had a degradation kink. Here at the very root of the meme we see several of the features that have since come to define it: mashups and comparisons with popular culture and current affairs, and a peculiar enthusiasm to sexualise a long-dead Babylonian.

Internet Meme Logics

What makes a meme a meme? The image of the complaint tablet went viral on tumblr and Reddit, shared hundreds of thousands of times in a few days. But while virality refers to this sort of sudden, rapid, but time-limited circulation, memetics describes more complex, longer-lasting processes characterised by ‘transformative reappropriation’ (Milner 2016, 38):

> It's an easy shortcut to call a solitary image we scroll past on Twitter or Tumblr a *meme*, as if the term is synonymous with 'a quirky little JPG from the internet.' ... An individual tweet or image or mashup or video isn't in and of itself a *meme*, though it may be *memetic* in its connection to other tweets, images, mashups, and videos, and it may *memetically* spread along with others in kind. In this connection and spread lies the true significance of memetic media. (Milner 2016, 3)

Similarly, rather than regarding a 'meme' as a single digital object subject to Darwinian selection processes, memeticists have identified them as clusters of similar and related digital media. Schifman defines memes by three linked criteria: '(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.' (2014, 41). Schifman's explicit aim was to promote an agent-centred perspective in meme scholarship, based on the identification of the different voices and viewpoints involved in the social construction of memes as public discourses.

Beyond the identification of memes and meme-makers it is worth considering them in action, and in particular their characteristic forms of emergence, transformation, and transmission. Milner identifies five 'fundamental logics' in memetic media:

> **Multimodality** – memes creating meaning through a combination of image, object, text, audio, video, etc.
> **Reappropriation** – blending and blurring between old and new, assigning new meanings and contexts.
> **Resonance** – the memetic material connects with people in ways powerful enough to inspire a web of creative engagements.
> **Collectivism** – as in folk cultures, the meme becomes part of the 'shared text' of a social group.
> **Spread** – a growth and distribution that persists across time, longer and more complicated than the spectacular but brief lifespan of solely viral media – see also Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) who define memes as 'spreadable media'. (Milner 2016, 23-34)

This framework enables us to take a more systematic approach to the study of the Complaint Tablet meme: as we will see, it is strikingly multimodal as artefact, narrative, and an ever-evolving set of images. The striking longevity of Ea-Naṣir in internet meme culture is testament to the layers of resonance explored in this paper, and its function as in in-joke that promotes and proclaims group identity. One of the growing fields of meme research is folklore studies, which offers a distinct set of analytical tools and frameworks for understanding both the memes themselves and their cultural contexts (e.g. Oring 2014; Fiadotava 2023; Flinterud 2023).

The Ea-Naṣir Meme in Action

How does the Ea-Naṣir meme multiply, adapt and survive? Or more simply – how does it work? A great part of its success lies in its multimodality and in the ability of the tablet, the text, the copper ingots, and Ea-Naṣir himself to spark recognition across a wide variety of

media and forms. While it is possible to discuss individual iterations of the meme, as shown below, its cultural impact and power derives precisely from this barrage of different forms.

Ea-Naṣir is often invoked as a symbol of fraud and criminal notoriety in memes featuring *inter alia* Donald Trump, 'Tiger King' Joe Exotic, Rudy Giuliani, and pirate Captain Jack Sparrow. Meanwhile, the figure of the dishonest businessman chimes with the 'trade offer' meme, and has spawned a number of crossovers. Unsurprisingly, there is an iteration of the meme that blends the Complaint Tablet with Monty Python's *Dead Parrot Sketch*, modern Western culture's hitherto most popular archetype of the disgruntled customer and dismissive business owner. Ea-Naṣir has made two appearances in the popular webcomic Xkcd, which draws heavily on internet meme cultures: first in 2022 in reference to 'deepfakes', and again in 2023 with recurring character Cueball exclaiming 'I've been bamboozled by Ea-Nāṣir!'[7]

The copper ingots at the heart of the dispute have an independent memetic life: as the contaminant in a 'check your Halloween candy' meme, and eaten by Winnie the Pooh in a 'that's not honey' meme. Like the complaint tablet and named figures from the text, images of copper ingots have become a shorthand for the Ea-Naṣir meme in general: these are overwhelmingly modern, rectangular copper ingots, individually or in piles. There is little interest in representing historically-accurate ancient copper ingots. Social media responses to the low-quality copper/Halloween candy meme included 'EA NASIR AT IT AGAIN'; 'Someone hop in their time machine and go get Ea-Nasir real quick. I wanna see his face when he learns he's still being roasted 3,750 years later', and 'knowing how we know about that scum sucking inferior copper scam artist, probably love it.'[8] (Figure 2).

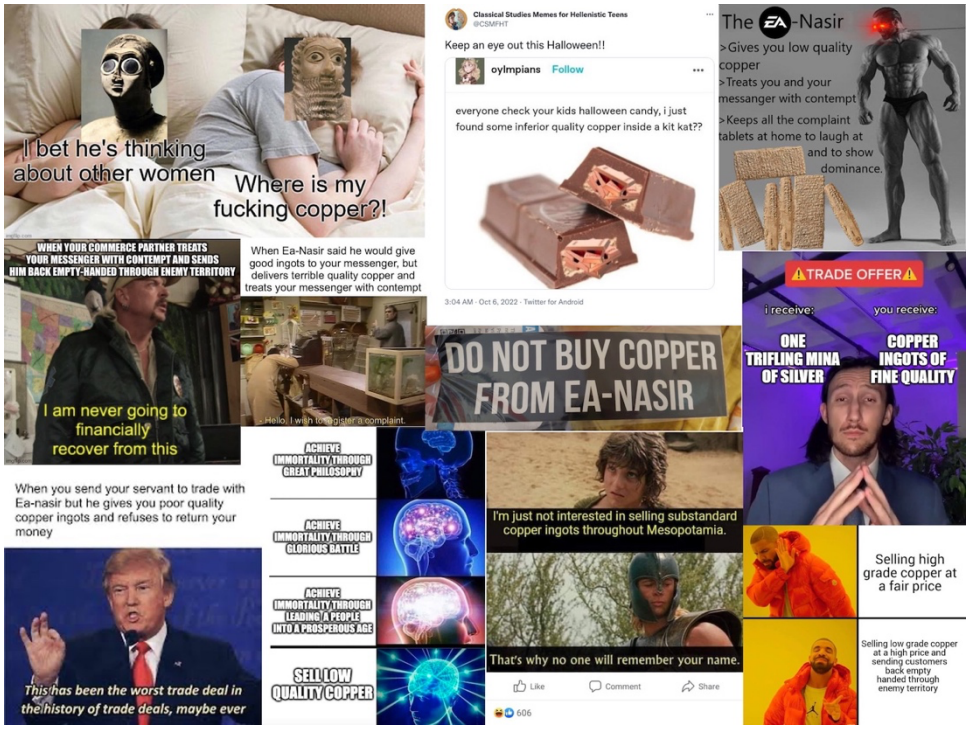

Figure 2: Meme Montage 1.

Détournement and comic juxtaposition are fundamental features of meme culture. The 'blending and blurring' that Milner identified as a feature of memetic 'reappropriation' can take some remarkably imaginative and creative forms. For example, the demon Crowley from the novel and television series *Good Omens*, tempting humankind to evil since the Fall of Man, has been represented in meme form as a friend, customer, or lover of Ea-Naṣir: alternatively, Crowley and Ea-Naṣir have been suggested to be one and the same person (Gaiman and Pratchett 1990). Ea-Naṣir has also been identified in memes and fanfic with vampire Nandor the Relentless from *What We Do in the Shadows,* a poor-quality armorer in *The Mandalorian*, and as a previous incarnation of K-pop megastar Jimin. Beyond established fandoms such as these Ea-Naṣir's intrusions into wider meme culture is similarly diverse, demonstrating its resonance with a wide range of media users. The variety of the meme, from references to low-quality copper to the named characters in the tablet, allow users to perform insider knowledge or 'inside jokes', part of Milner's criteria for meme 'collectivism'.

Memetic Responses to Current Affairs

Many instances of the meme appear in response to news items, particularly stories with links to copper, fraud, or other elements of Ea-Naṣir lore. For example, reports in summer 2024 that major aircraft manufacturers had been using 'counterfeit' titanium components were shared with titles such as 'Air Nasir', and a new batch of memes appeared. Fiadotava has examined memetic responses to current affairs as meaning-making practices from a folkloric perspective, and notes that the power of meme formats can come to overwhelm whatever original 'message' or ideas were initially highlighted in conventional news reporting (2023, 318).

Perhaps the pinnacle of Ea-Naṣir-related excitement came in March 2021, when Geneva-based commodity traders Mercuria Energy Trading discovered that they had been defrauded in a deal to buy 10,000 tons of low-grade copper. When the shipments from Turkey arrived in China the containers were discovered to be filled with stones covered in copper-coloured paint. The memetic response was immediate: 'Ea-Nasir is that YOU', a tumblr post that gained more than 30,000 reactions with a screenshot of the news report and the hashtags #Ea-Nasir #he's back. Comments included 'There [sic] legend returns, stronger than ever before'; 'DAMN YOU EA-NASIR'; and also 'Ok, did I miss something that everyone here knows who he is? I had to google it and could not figure out why everyone got the reference'.[9] Other responses to the copper scam included a screenshot of the movie title-card for 'The Return of the King', and an adapted *Star Wars* image macro: 'Somehow, Ea-Nasir has returned'.

Other examples are more subtle, emphasising the variety within the meme. In September 2021 the Australian government withdrew from a multi-billion-dollar deal to buy nuclear submarines from France, causing a diplomatic rift between the two countries. In response to this news, a Twitter user rewrote the Complaint Tablet text:

> tell france australia sends the following message: when you came, you said to me: 'i will give fine quality submarines.' you left, but you did not do what you promised me. you put submarines which were not good before my messenger and said: if you want to take them, take them! … what do you take me for that you treat me with such

> contempt? how have you treated me for those submarines? you have withheld my money bag from me in the south china sea; it is now up to you to restore to me in full.[10]

There is no reference to copper or to Ea-Naṣir: the success of the joke relies on widespread familiarity not only with the Complaint Tablet meme in general, but with the full text of the tablet itself. This highlights again the remarkable multimodality of the Ea-Naṣir meme, ranging across the image of the tablet on display, the object itself, the named figures and commodities that it mentions, and the text in its entirety. It is also worth reiterating Fiadotava's warning that memes can paint a veneer of unseriousness or 'just joking' across real world events, sometimes with malicious political intent (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Meme Montage 2.

Fanfic

Some of the most elaborate manifestations of the Ea-Naṣir meme can be found in fanfic, in texts that take the characters named in Ea-Naṣir's correspondence and insert them into new narratives. Fan fiction, 'the fastest growing form of writing in the world' (Fathallah 2017, 9), is a genre of unauthorised transformative works based on original media. Its creators 'extend storylines, create new narrative threads, develop romantic relationships between characters, and focus on the lives of undeveloped characters' (Black 2009, 398). The study of fanfic is an emerging area of research in classical receptions, arguably a natural extension of the wealth of studies focused on other aspects of the classics in popular culture (e.g. Potter 2015; Harrisson 2016).

The source materials for fanfic vary enormously, but a large proportion are derived from popular television, film, gaming, musical and literary fandoms such as those around *Star*

Trek, *Harry Potter*, and *Supernatural*. The hugely successful *Fifty Shades of Grey* book series famously began life as *Twilight* fanfic. The smaller category of fanfic featuring living (or dead) people such as Ea-Naṣir is known as Real Person Fiction or RPF (Fathallah 2018).

Some of the Ea-Naṣir fics posted on leading online fanfic portal Archive of Our Own (aka AO3) feature crossovers with Mesopotamian myth and religion, as well as Arthurian, Ancient Greek, and Norse pantheons (including one that features Loki, Prometheus, Sappho, Herodotus and Ea-Naṣir). Potter's study of classical fanfic cited above focuses on 'slash' fiction, which focuses on non-canonical sexual relations between characters. Several of the Ea-Naṣir RPFs feature romance and sex, including pairing Ea-Naṣir and his real-life business partner Ilšu-tillassu, and an enemies-to-lovers storyline for Nanni and Ea-Naṣir.[11]

A few are based on the novel and television series *Good Omens* mentioned earlier: the most impressive of these is a fic in the form of a cuneiform inscription in Akkadian on real clay tablets, entitled *A Letter from "Crawly" to Azirapil*. The creator of this object/text is biblical scholar Esther Brownsmith, a writer and scholar of fanfic, who notes that 'I love it when fandom results in actual tangible objects': her previous creations include an Ishtar invocation in cross-stitch, and gingerbread inscribed with the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* in cuneiform (pers. comm., June 7, 2022).

Alongside its material form, the digital version of *A Letter from "Crawly" to Azirapil* includes convincingly academic-sounding commentary and footnotes, including reference to the non-existent 'University of West Wessex', and a note that 'The relationship between the two (brothers? business partners? friends?) is unknown', lampooning the academic tendency to overlook or erase queer relationships and identities in the past. The text itself reads:

> Tell Azirapil:
> Thus says "Crawly":
> When will your time in the West be finished? Abiraham seems very dirty, and I am weary in Ur. [There is] a talented mirsu-maker on Wide Street!
> Watch out, for I have acquired a new friend. His name is Ea-Naṣir, and I may play wickedly with him if you do not return.
> Come quickly![12]

The translation of the short text into Akkadian required amendments to the text, but Brownsmith notes that this added new dimensions such as 'the word that means "weary, depressed" but also "love-sick"' (pers. comm., June 7, 2022).

Several of the Ea-Naṣir RPFs feature romance and sex, including pairing Ea-Naṣir and his real-life business partner Ilšu-tillassu, and an enemies-to-lovers storyline for Nanni and Ea-Naṣir. To me this sexualisation and queering of Ea-Naṣir by and for a largely Western fanfic community provides uncomfortable echoes of the history of orientalist literature, and a powerful theme that Said and others have identified that associates the Orient with 'dangerous sex': permissive, sensual, threatening, and othering (Said 2003, 167. This racializing of Ea-Naṣir is also discussed in more detail in a following section) (Figure 4). The RPF and RPS tags on these fics are also a reminder that Ea-Naṣir is a real Mesopotamian man inserted into a modern cultural context that includes the infamous Abu Ghraib photographs of the torture and sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners.

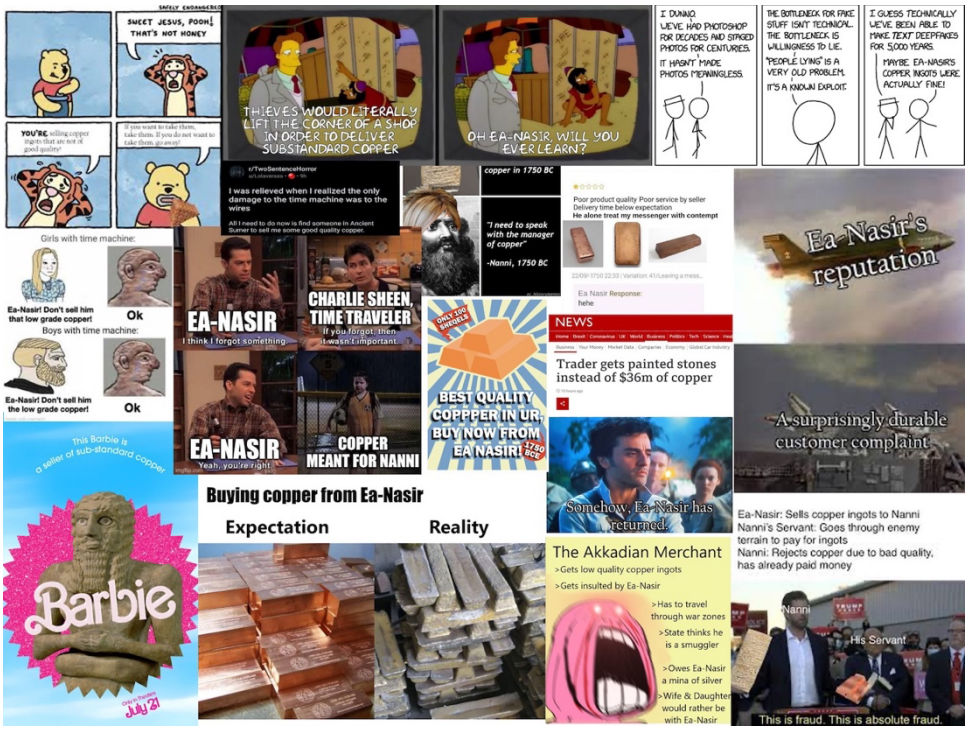

Figure 4: Meme Montage 3.

Another perspective on the highly multimodal Ea-Naṣir fanfic might focus less on the man and more on the Complaint Tablet as object and text, in its context of display in the British Museum. In her study of fanfic cultures, Busse (2017) explores the power dynamic between the authors or creators of original characters, and the fans who write new stories and scenarios. She argues that there exists a negotiable relation between creator and fans over who can authoritatively determine the limits and scope of the canon. One of these power dynamics is gender: as Fathallah points out, fanfic is part of a category of cultural creation that is 'scorned and devalued' in part because it is 'coded female' (2017, 9). The power dynamic in the Ea-Naṣir meme is more subtle, but one could argue that the authority in this case is the academic/curatorial power of the British Museum, against which the reappropriations into memes and fanfic, and in particular the queering of the characters, represent a radical challenge. This counter-hegemonic reading and the orientalist critique are just two amongst many potential interpretive framings of the Complaint Tablet meme.

High Quality Merchandise

> Just saw someone at my college wearing a mask that said 'don't buy copper from Ea-Nasir' and we all wish we were that funny[13]

It seems appropriate that a meme with its roots in an artefact should make the leap from the digital to the material. On the online store Etsy one can find the full text of the Complaint Tablet on tea-towels and tote-bags, along with t-shirts for 'Ea-Nasir's Copper Ingots: Being of Finest Quality Since 1750 BC: Messengers Treated With Respect', and ceramic Christmas tree ornaments that read 'Ea-Nasir sends warm wishes for a holiday season of Finest Quality'. Since I began to include the Complaint Tablet meme in my teaching,

students have gifted me Ea-Nasir ‘merch’ including stickers reading ‘Ea-Nasir did nothing wrong’ and ‘Well behaved copper ingot merchants rarely make history’.

Designer Amanda Jones has two Ea-Naṣir designs on her Redbubble store, which allows buyers to choose between a range of products including hats, clothing, phone cases, art prints, badges, water bottles and fridge-magnets. The first reads ‘Ea-Nasir Fine Quality Copper’ with a line of cuneiform writing. The second reads ‘I went to Ur and that through enemy territory and all I got was this low quality copper’. The merchandise, in turn, feeds the meme: a grainy photo of a bumper sticker reading ‘Do not buy copper from Ea-Nasir’ was posted on tumblr and gained 32,000 reactions and comments including ‘I love how EA-Nasir will never die in human memory’; ‘Hahahaha! Much want!’; and ‘I don’t get it’.

Alongside the commercial Ea-Naṣir merchandise there are also individual artworks and DIY objects, with a growing number of fans printing 3D models of the complaint tablet. Interestingly the 3D scan used to print these replicas was posted by the British Museum itself, one of just 269 models on the institution’s Sketchfab page at the time of writing. The Rosetta Stone model has been downloaded more than 10,000 time, compared to just 88 for the head of Amenhotep III, and a respectable 959 for the complaint tablet.[14]

The Tablet in the British Museum

Behind the digital artefacts of the meme there is the tablet itself, and its current location in Room 56 of the British Museum. In their study of the redisplay of the Mesopotamian material in the adjacent Room 55, British Museum curators Irving Finkel and Alexandra Fletcher reflect on the challenges that cuneiform tablets present to museums: ‘To the uninitiated, a pile of them recalls dog biscuits, for they are usually flat, brownish, and monotonous-looking.’ (2019, 67). Room 55 displays amongst other things a small sample of the tens of thousands of tablets from the Royal Library of Ashurbanipal, discovered in Nineveh in the mid-nineteenth century. One of the focuses of Finkel and Fletcher’s discussion is the challenge of making cuneiform tablets more appealing to visitors, and to encourage more engagement in a room that ‘visitors characteristically marched through … without breaking step.’ (2019, 63). As curators, they saw their role as bringing the stories of the objects alive, ‘establishing a curatorial voice within the gallery that might even be humorous, provocative, or surprising, while at the same time maintaining awareness of readership and academic rigor.’ (2019, 64).

To this end, rather than display the cuneiform tablets from the Royal Library as solitary objects, they were placed on library-like bookshelves with some of them stacked in rows. The new displays did not feature full translations of the text, but rather a choice sentence from each document, making it easier for readers to get a sense of the range of texts in the library. To the curators’ satisfaction, ‘An unlooked-for benefit here has been tweetability of such quotations. One with a spell to send a fractious baby to sleep (BM K.9171) has been especially popular.’ (Finkel and Fletcher 2019, 68). It is worth noting that the chapter quoted here was based on a conference presentation in June 2014, and thus pre-dates the Ea-Naṣir meme by almost a year (Emberling and Petit 2019, xxi). With this context, the curatorial satisfaction at visitor engagement with shareable content feels like the calm before the storm. To my knowledge the British Museum has not responded to any aspect or iteration of the Complaint Tablet meme, despite direct questions on social media: this most likely

reflects a cautious social media policy. Meanwhile, the British Museum's rapacious collecting history has become an internet meme in its own right (see Moshenska 2023).[15]

For many years Ea-Naṣir fans have been visiting the tablet and posting photographic proof online. Since 2022 this has become referred to more generally as 'the pilgrimage', particularly on the meme's subreddit. Here you can find dozens of posts with titles like 'Made the pilgrimage', 'I completed the pilgrimage', 'I wore the shirt. I saw the tablet. I have completed the pilgrimage', and 'I have had the honour and glory of allowing my unworthy eyes bask in ethereal light of the holy tablet'. One more jaunty visitor announced that 'So was in London a few weeks ago, couldn't resist a pilgrimage! My partner was not thrilled to be dragged all over the British Museum...' Many of these posts are accompanied by nearly-identical photographs of the tablet in its display case, to the point that one pilgrim pleaded jokingly 'if you're going to show your pilgrimage, mix it up a little :)'.[16] Interestingly, more than one pilgrim reported encountering other Ea-Naṣir admirers in the museum. It is notoriously difficult to reliably transform online engagement with heritage and museums into 'IRL' visitors through the door, but this suggests that at least a very small component of the British Museum's visitor numbers are driven directly by the complaint tablet meme.

Ea-Naṣir as a Middle Eastern Male

Visual representations of Ea-Naṣir himself draw on a variety of established memes as well as archaeological sources. 'Soomer' memes, part of the broader category of 'Wojak' reaction memes feature a smiling, bald, seated figure accompanied by cuneiform text. The image of 'Soomer' (Sumer) is based on the king figure from the 'Peace' panel of the highly decorated wooden box known as the 'Standard of Ur', also on display in Room 56 of the British Museum. Some meme representations of Ea-Naṣir have used this figure or just its head, often pasted on to other bodies from established meme formats.

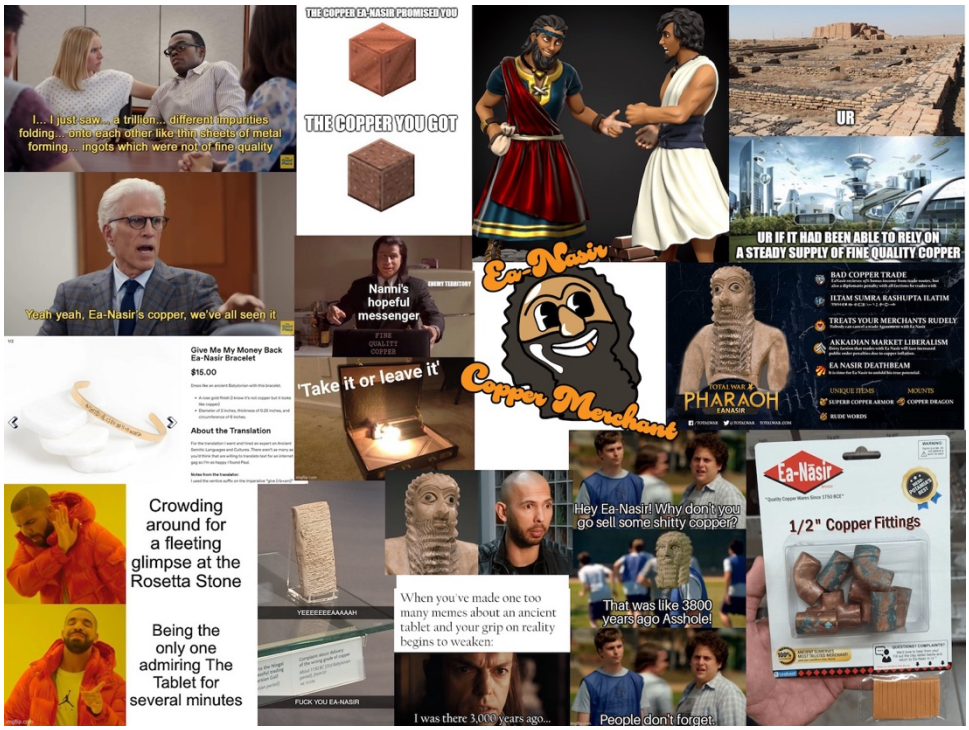

Figure 5: Meme Montage 4.

Earlier representations of Ea-Naṣir used a variety of sources including racist caricatures, but more recently there has been a focus on a single image source: the stone figurines from the Tell Asmar Hoard, and in particular the 'Standing Male Worshiper' figure at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (see Frankfort 1939) (Figure 5). This figure or its head/face have been used in a variety of Ea-Naṣir memes, including mashups with publicity materials from the 2023 *Barbie* movie (see Figure 4).

There are aspects of the Ea-Naṣir meme that make me uncomfortable, and these relate to Western stereotypes of the Middle East in general, and Middle Eastern and Arab men in particular. Jack Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs* is a comprehensive and damning analysis of the representation of Arabs and Muslims in almost one thousand Hollywood films from the nineteenth century through to the twenty-first. He asks: 'What is an Arab? In countless films, Hollywood alleges the answer: Arabs are brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women' (Shaheen 2003, 172). Positive or neutral representations, or as Shaheen puts it 'normal, human' Arabs, appear in just five percent of the films surveyed.

The negative cultural impacts of these and other representations of Arabs are well-attested in studies of public attitudes in the United States and elsewhere (e.g. Slade 1981). This is a powerful and enduring strand of racism, closely tied to Islamophobia, that remains widely culturally acceptable and marketable. The specific trope that troubles me here is what Bahdi (2019) calls the 'liar/untrustworthy motif', which he highlights in real-life accounts of anti-Arab racism, and also links to representations of Jewish and Chinese minorities in the West. Suleiman's study of Arab stereotypes also picks up this theme: 'this image of the Arabs presents him as a liar and a cheat, one who cannot be trusted. He is, furthermore, dirty and immoral, i.e. does not subscribe to Western codes of morality.' (1982).

Edward Said reflected on how 'In the films and television the Arab is associated either with lechery or bloodthirsty dishonesty. He appears as an oversexed degenerate, capable, it is true, of cleverly devious intrigues, but essentially sadistic, treacherous, low.' (2003, 286-7). Said quotes Evelyn Baring, the former Consul-General of Egypt, who described Arabs in his popular writings on Egypt as predisposed to intrigue, cunning, and lies (2003, 38-9).

Hollywood's Arabs: the wheedling market trader, the light-fingered pickpocket, and the double-dealing Sheikh, make up a significant part of the cultural background against which the Ea-Naṣir meme is received and understood. This is the context not only for the more openly derogatory iterations of the meme – 'that scum sucking inferior copper scam artist' – but for its popularity in general. The Ea-Naṣir meme both reflects and reinforces Bahdi's 'liar/untrustworthy motif': an already powerful, racist, othering stereotype of Middle Eastern men.

The Internet Reflects on its Love for Ea-Naṣir

Given the popularity and endurance of the Ea-Naṣir meme, it is only natural that some of its fans should have reflected on the reasons for its longstanding success (reflections that almost invariably omit the racialised elements outlined above). Nonetheless, they offer

valuable insights into the ‘resonance’ of the meme and the roots of its ‘collectivism’, to use Milner’s terms. When asked whether they would want to ‘be trending like Ea-Nasir … in terms of meme resilience’, one user replied that

> if I were a scammer of any kind, I would want the story of my dishonestly to be what Ea-Nasir’s is. It’s not just that he’s one of a handful of classical figures that are now so well-known, and it’s not just that his tricksterish nature is a meme, that he has fame well beyond death. It’s that the reason we know about him is that he kept his complaint letters. He lovingly preserved his hate mail and we know about him because we found his stash.
>
> Ea-Nasir wasn’t just a rip-off artist, he was a petty rip-off artist who seems to have loved his work. I think the reason we all love him is because we feel like he is enthusiastically complicit in the jokes we make about him. He makes us feel like we’re on the inside of something, even if it is just the sale of low-quality copper, and if I can make people feel that way almost four thousand years after my death, sure. Sign me up.[17]

It is notable that here as in almost all discussion of the Complaint Tablet it is the recipient Ea-Naṣir who is seen to be ‘humanised’ and not the aggrieved Nanni, the author of the text.

A key element in the success of the meme is its inherent nerdiness, which allows it to be used as an ‘in-joke’ to form, identify, and strengthen virtual communities. To do this it must strike a balance between obscurity (the source of its appeal) and universality (to function as a shared reference point). This is reflected in several discussions of the meme on tumblr:

> I really do love how transcendentally Tumblrish it is, the way we all insist on dragging Ea-Nasir throughout time (ours and his). Think about it. Some of us are nerds with a freakishly focused specialty. Others are just that petty. And still others are out there working so durned hard to expose the damages inherent in capitalism, even if capitalism (strictly speaking) did not yet exist … All of which is to say: Ea-Nasir, I love and/or hate you. Ea-Nassir haters? All love.[18]

And, from a separate blog:

> the best part of tumblr memeing about ea-nasir is that ea-nasir himself would probably love it. this is a man who hoarded peoples’ complaints about his shitty copper. he would find it hilarious that people from 4000 years into the future are making jokes about him. this is likely exactly what he wanted his legacy to be.[19]

The Appeal of Ancient Villains

A common factor in several of the commentaries on the Complaint Tablet meme is the appeal of identifying a historically-attested individual at such a long remove, and bearing witness to their very human failings: “In a culture with lots of instantaneous but ephemeral information transferred, what people find amusing/fascinating is meaningful communication across vast time distances, even if it's inadvertent”[20]. This fascination with connections

through time with flawed, funny, or generally awful human beings can also be seen in Ea-Naṣir fans' suggestions of other, similarly meme-able figures from the ancient world.

The coppersmith Alexander, who according to 2 Timothy 4:14 'did me much evil' was proposed to be a 'New Testament successor to Ea-Nasir'. Other tumblr anti-heroes include 'pi-ri-ta-wo' the Royal potter of Ancient Pylos, notable for his astonishingly shoddy work: 'Ea-Nasir might have a competitor in terms of "ancient guys who flagrantly sold terrible wares" except this guy one-upped him by selling them to the *king*.'[21] Hruby identifies pi-ri-ta-wo as the Royal ceramicist likely responsible for around half of the 12,000 vessels uncovered at the Mycenaean Palace of Nestor, noting that 'its quality is abysmal': she speculates that this may have been the result of work produced under obligation rather than for pay (Hruby 2013, 424). One tumblr user who identifies herself as an archaeologist admits that the documentary record for pi-ri-ta-wo is rather thin: 'but it's fun to speculate. And nice to know that even 3300 years ago, some people were either also mad at unreasonable commission demands… or just not very good at their jobs.'[22]

Another suggestion comes from Ancient Egypt: 'look I know we all love our shitty copper jokes and those are great and all, but you lot have seriously been sleeping on the absolute menace that is Paneb'.[23] Papyrus Salt 124, now also in the collection of the British Museum, is a long and detailed condemnation of Paneb, a senior workman at Deir el-Medina, written by his enemy Amennakht and addressed to the vizier. From the translation and commentary published by Černý in 1929 we know that Paneb's alleged wrongdoings included debauchery, bribery, assault, tomb robbing, stealing tools, and sitting on top of the sarcophagus of Seti II. As his champion on tumblr put it, 'man was a fucking trainwreck of drunkenness, violence, and exploitation'.[24]

The power and resonance of this notion that 'humans never change', echoed in memes and media coverage, is a cornerstone of influential public engagement with the human past. It is a reminder that studying Ea-Naṣir offers insights into communication for historians, archaeologists, museum curators and others.

> Ea-Nasir wasn't a king or a great warrior, or a poet. He didn't invent or discover anything that changed the world. He may never have done anything remarkable in his life. He was just some asshole who sold really really shitty copper. And over 3000 years after he died, we know his name. And that's amazing.[25]

Discussion

The excavations at Ur from 1922 to 1934 that uncovered the house of Ea-Naṣir made Leonard Woolley a household name in Britain. A pioneer of public archaeology, Woolley's BBC broadcasts, journalism, and bestselling books *Ur of the Chaldees* (1929) and *Digging up the Past* (1930) brought new audiences to Mesopotamian archaeology. Woolley showed a flair for storytelling: the rolled silver hair ribbon found in the 'Great Death Pit' at Ur was evidence, Woolley argued, of a sacrificial victim late for her own funeral (Maloigne 2023). In the era of digital public archaeology the variety of media is far greater, their range truly global, and their consumers far more siloed. In this context, the emergence and enduring success of the complaint tablet meme – forged and driven by 'the public' without academic impetus – is a manifestation of the 'multiple perspectives' model of public archaeology

heralded by Holtorf, Merriman and others, and identified by McDavid as a particular strength of internet-era public archaeology (Holtorf 2000; Merriman 2004; McDavid 2004).

In this paper I have outlined some of the features of a single meme since its emergence in 2015. This longevity is remarkable and justifies this peculiarly detailed analysis of a single meme, as social media scholar Lowe notes:

> Memes mean nothing in isolation, but only as they are shared, cross-referenced, and vigorously remixed by fans working as activists … competition is fierce for which phrases, snowclones, macros, and other types of information will survive and which will gain traction, meaning, and durability in an ever-shifting, gift-economy landscape of reblogs and likes. (Lowe 2020, 191)

My exploration of the dimensions of the Ea-Naṣir meme have demonstrated that its resonance and appeal are complex and multimodal. At one level there is the pleasure in 'knowing' somebody – their name, their home, their work, and something of their personality – at such a distance in time. Added to this is the appealing aura of villainy: lies, bluster, double-dealing, and at their heart the low-quality copper ingots that have become a shorthand for the narrative of the Complaint Tablet. For many iterations of the meme, these two layers are enough – the world's oldest letter of complaint, the world's first crooked businessman (with, as noted above, the accompanying racist stereotypes). The final layer is based on the discovery of the tablet in Ea-Naṣir's home, and the supposition – likely inaccurate – that this implies a diabolical delight in his own bad reputation. This is what elevates the Ea-Naṣir of the meme from ingot scammer to archetypal trickster: his allegedly playful, mocking attitude to social and business norms, and the superior or anachronistic knowledge that this implies. This knowing, mischievous Ea-Naṣir is the basis of the more elaborate and imaginative memes, the crossovers with contemporary popular culture, and in particular the connections with figures such as Loki and the demon Crowley. If social media has a pantheon, Ea-Naṣir is a trickster god.

The broader question that I posed at the opening of this paper remains: what might this rich but narrow strand of cultural impact tell us about popular interest in ancient history, archaeology, and ancient people and cultures? The answer is not straightforward. In one respect, while the emergence, spread, and endurance of the Ea-Naṣir meme is remarkable, it is also too strikingly unusual to be used as a model or a data point: like Spiders Georg, another figure of internet folklore, it is an outlier adn should not have been counted.[26] From a different perspective, the extraordinary online afterlife of the Complaint Tablet has value as a case study in reception studies, and specifically – as outlined earlier – in the race, conflict, and colonialism-infused contemporary receptions of the Ancient Near East.

Moser has noted the disparity between classical receptions with its emphasis on ancient texts and their modern interpretations, and broader archaeological reception research which focuses more on the material and visual (2015: 1275). The multimodality of the Ea-Naṣir meme, highlighted at several points in this points, derives in part from its straddling this divide. The origins of the meme lie in the image of the tablet itself, and its laconic label. However, later iterations and developments have drawn upon elements as diverse as the archaeological context of its discovery, the named individuals in the text, and the copper ingots that formed the focus of the complaint. The visualisations of Ea-Naṣir himself in many

of these memes has drawn upon a variety of Ancient Near Eastern art and artefacts, as well as cartoons with exaggerated and racialised features. Future research on this meme might focus on these images in more detail. From these perspectives the meme might appear to straddle the disciplinary divide that Moser identifies. Hopefully this paper can be a contribution towards Moser's call for more critical analyses of receptions in archaeology and their impacts upon knowledge and understanding. At present the study of internet memes in general is a relatively under-developed field, lacking a clearly established framework of methods or research tools: similarly, the ethics of social media-focused research remain a work-in-progress (but see Woodfield 2018).

As part of this framework for future work we might consider this question of ethics, as well as the problem of historical inaccuracies in many iterations of the Complaint Tablet, from minor errors of dating to the fanciful attribution of malign intent in Ea-Naṣir's retention of the tablet. Is there a harm in this exaggerated, inaccurate 'meme' version of Ea-Naṣir the man? Philosophers and archaeologists have debated whether or not it is possible to harm the dead. Scarre approaches the issue by applying Kant's argument that 'we desire to stand well in others' eyes, both presently and posthumously', and that this pursuit of respect is threatened by archaeologists who can reduce a life to a few dry, material data points gleaned from a grave (2003, 243). These posthumous indignities, Scarre argues, can constitute a harm not merely to the dead, but to the living individual they once were. However, he offers an afterthought: 'It is a plausible claim that the revelations by archaeologists of the details of past lives are a stronger counter to Oblivion than the preservation of dead bodies intact in their graves' – in other words, better to be embarrassed than forgotten (2003, 247). Few of the dead are as well qualified to dispute that claim as Ea-Naṣir, and the ethical implications of the meme remain fertile ground for future research.

This paper has focused on a single meme: future studies might focus on specific social media channels, take a broader comparative approach, focus on specifics of representation or visualisation, or employ digital humanities tools for the collection and analysis of larger datasets. This expansion and diversification of scholarship should not lose sight of the chaotic humour and sense of subversive fun that underpins much of meme culture. Buy the shitty copper, punch the Nazi, mock the Pompeii skeleton, seduce the Etruscan boar vessel, nibble the Assyrian tablets, drink the sarcophagus juice, and rejoice in the oddities of memetic engagements with ancient people, places, and artefacts.

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[1] Comment on post https://sumerianlanguage.tumblr.com/post/124085135301/babylonian-era-problems-photo-via-tbc34
[2] https://www.change.org/p/let-people-drink-the-red-liquid-from-the-dark-sarcophagus
[3] A note on citations and ethics: the use of social media posts in social research remains controversial. All block-quotes from social media used in this paper are cited with the permission of their authors. Where references are made to specific memes without a citation, the *e* wiki is a good but not infallible source (and see Pettis 2022 for a discussion of its value). For further discussion of the ethics of social media research, see Townsend and Wallace 2016 and papers in Woodfield 2018.

[4] In my research notes for this paper, I referred to the Complaint Tablet meme as the 'ur-meme', given its deep and ancient roots, and Ea-Naṣir's connections with the city of Ur. I have since discovered to my delight that Ur-Meme was in fact a historic figure in ancient Mesopotamia: a prefect of the temple of Inanna in Nippur, born some four centuries before Ea-Naṣir (Hallo 1972).
[5] https://mortalmab.tumblr.com/post/647040818557960192/me-scrolling-through-tumblr-giggles-mom-whats quoted with permission.
[6] https://homunculus-argument.tumblr.com/post/678434897216569344/the-best-part-of-ea-nasirs-tablets-is-that-there quoted with permission.
[7] https://xkcd.com/2758/
[8] https://www.tumblr.com/blog/view/oylmpians/665619323209056256?source=share
quoted with permission.
[9] https://brightwanderer.tumblr.com/post/645195882465230848/ea-nasir-is-that-you quoted with permission.
[10] https://twitter.com/Theophite/status/1442348349965799433?s=20&t=_mUduhYyFMqgWKn5kWOmog quoted with permission.
[11] With the exception of Brownsmith's work, I do not have the authors permissions to quote or reference these and previously discussed fics, so I limit my discussion to these brief outlines.
[12] https://archiveofourown.org/works/19730593 quoted with permission.
[13] https://night-time-anxi-tea.tumblr.com/post/667405723870855168/just-saw-someone-at-my-college-wearing-a-mask-that quoted with permission
[14] https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/clay-tablet-0903925c9bbd4f55abf00571196f98e4 it is interesting to note that the British Museum has posted the file under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.
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